

...that Nowruz, the Persian or Iranian New Year, will be celebrated on March 21?

Nowruz marks the beginning of the year in the Iranian calendar during which families and friends in Iran and other countries in the Middle East, Central Asia, and other parts of the world celebrate both the New Year and the start of spring. Nowruz is also the New Year for the nearly six million Baha'is throughout the world, including in Iran where they constitute the largest non-Muslim religious minority population. Unfortunately, for Baha'is and so many others in Iran, the home of the majority of people celebrating Nowruz, there is little to celebrate.

Iran, a constitutional, theocratic republic, discriminates against its citizens on the basis of religion or belief. Since the 1979 Iranian revolution, many members of minority religious communities have fled Iran for fear of persecution, and those who remain face discrimination, arrest, imprisonment and even death. The late February [report](#) that the U.N.'s Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran issued underscores continued widespread and systematic violations of human rights and the ongoing intimidation, arrest and detention of religious minorities.

USCIRF Chair Dr. Katrina Lantos Swett, [testified](#) before Congress at a March 15, 2013 Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission hearing,

The Worsening Plight of Religious Minorities in Iran.□

Dr. Lantos Swett highlighted that all of Iran's religious minorities have had their rights violated -- from Baha'is and Zoroastrians to Christians and Jews, as well as Muslims belonging to minority

Sufi and Sunni sects and even Muslims who are part of Iran's Shi'a majority. Dissidents and human rights defenders increasingly have been subject to abuse and several have been sentenced to death for the capital crime of "waging war against God." The government also continues to use its religious laws to silence reformers, including women's rights activists and journalists, for exercising their internationally-protected rights to freedom of expression and religion or belief. Heightened anti-Semitism and repeated Holocaust denials by senior government officials have increased fear among Iran's Jewish community, the largest – with the exception of Israel -- in the Middle East and North Africa. USCIRF's recommendations include:

- The U.S. government should continue to designate Iran as a Country of Particular Concern or CPC and sanction Iran based on its systematic, egregious and ongoing violations of religious freedom;
- The United States should continue to identify Iranian officials responsible for particularly severe religious freedom abuses, including Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, freeze their assets and bar their entry into the United States;
- Congress should reauthorize the Lautenberg Amendment, a life-line for religious minorities trapped in Iran who wish to escape; and
- The United States should call on Iran to release all prisoners who have been jailed on account of their religion or belief, and drop all charges against those with cases pending.